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ABSTRACT

This study explores the reasons for high turnover within rural superintendencies from the perspective of local boards of education. Forty-one school districts with 600 or fewer students in a southwestern state were identified as experiencing high superintendent turnover (having employed three or more superintendents within the past 5 years). Twenty-five (61 percent of the identified) school board presidents were interviewed over the telephone. The most common problems that existed between the board and previous superintendents included financial mismanagement, financial malfeasance, communication issues, and marital immorality. Twenty-seven (43 percent) of the 63 superintendents who left the districts were either terminated or forced to resign at the end of the school year; 3 (5 percent) were terminated during the school year; 15 (23 percent) resigned to accept positions in larger school districts or positions that paid more; the remainder left because of health reasons or retirement. Ninety-two percent of respondents revealed that only the board interviewed superintendent applicants and most respondents expressed concern about the hiring process. This study suggests: (1) school boards must be more thorough in the selection and hiring process; (2) state agencies responsible for certification of school administrators must become more proactive in addressing the issue of ineffective administrators; (3) the School Boards Association and State Department of Education should monitor and provide direct assistance to those schools experiencing excessive turnover; and (4) educational requirements must be more relevant to issues such as integrity, communication, and morality. (LP)

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SUPERINTENDENT INSTABILITY IN SMALL/RURAL SCHOOLS: THE SCHOOL BOARD PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study of school districts that have experienced a high rate to turnover of superintendents. School board presidents in each of the involved school districts were interviewed. The board presidents identified issues relating to financial mismanagement, financial malfeasance, communication, and immorality as the primary reasons for the excessive superintendent turnover.

SUPERINTENDENT INSTABILITY:
THE SCHOOL BOARD FACTOR

Rural schools in America are confronted with a great many issues ranging from inadequate finances to increased state mandates and educational requirements to heightened parental and community expectations. Many of the constraints that have historically inhibited the abilities of rural schools to provide education to all children can be overcome, provided the school leadership is stable and dedicated to excellence.

The reform decade of the 1980's reinforced the assertion that schools must have effective, proactive administrators to achieve established educational goals (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1980; Manasse, 1985). Leaders, in order to be effective, must be provided both the opportunity and an appropriate amount of time to accomplish district goals. Yet, excessive turmoil caused by a high rate of turnover in the superintendency in a school district can detract from the espoused purpose of educating youth. That turmoil may be the result of several diverse factors but when the conflict revolves around the school's leadership, the result can be demoralizing. Without a degree of stability in the district's leadership, little can be accomplished effectively. A constant and consistent upheaval in the leadership of a school creates a sense of organizational disequilibrium that hampers the functioning of the organization (Getzels and Guba, 1957).

Purpose of the Study

The most generally accepted view of appropriate school district administration is that a board of education should legislate policies and appraise the results and that the superintendent should serve as the chief executive who implements these policies (Hunkins, 1949). This simplistic view of the relationship between the superintendent and school board rarely exists in the real world. Indeed, relationships today between boards and the superintendents often reflect a high degree of conflict and uneasiness (Bailey, 1982; Shannon, 1989; Wildman, 1987). This relationship of conflict and mistrust

results in a high rate of turnover in the superintendency (Grady and Bryant, 1989; Hosman, 1989).

An exploration of critical incidents between the board and the superintendent from the superintendent's perspective was adequately addressed by Grady and Bryant (1989). They found that most superintendents had experienced some type of critical incident with their local school boards that often times resulted in superintendents' dismissals or resignations. The purpose of the study reported here was to ascertain the reason for high superintendent turnover in schools from the school board perspective. A high rate of turnover in the leadership of an organization creates a disequilibrium that impacts employee morale as well as organizational effectiveness (Bidwell, 1965; Getzels & Guba, 1957; Litterer, 1969).

Procedures

This study sought to explore the reasons for high turnover within the rural superintendency from the perspective of local boards of education experiencing such turnover. school board presidents' perceptions were the central focus of this study; thus, these researchers utilized interviews with selected school board presidents in one southwestern state in order to obtain thick descriptions of several instances of high superintendent turnover. Schools were identified as having a high turnover if they had employed three or more superintendents within the past five years.

Forty-one school districts were identified as meeting the research criteria. Letters were sent to each of the 41 school board presidents asking them to participate in the study. Twenty-five (61%) consented to be interviewed while five indicated that they did not desire to participate. Eleven did not respond to the initial request or any of the follow-up requests. Interviews, conducted by telephone, focused on personal and board related demographics, community special interest groups, critical problems between the board and superintendent, reasons for the superintendent turnover, and any established

criteria for the hiring of new superintendents. All of the interviewees were open, candid, and even pleased that someone was interested in their views.

School districts identified for this study were selected from districts with 600 or fewer students. Data collected from these interviews were analyzed independently by each researcher to determine common areas of concern addressed by school board presidents. Categories determined by independent analysis were then compared, resulting in the classification of critical issues described in the results of the study.

Results

Seventy-two percent of the school board presidents were male and 60% fell within the 41-50 age group. The majority of the respondents (56%) were reared in the local community and attended the school in which they served as a board member. Their occupations included rancher/farmer, the oil and gas field, postmaster, carpenter, or engineer. The single largest occupation category was farmers and ranchers with twenty-four percent (See Table 1).

INSERT TABLE I

ABOUT HERE

Almost all were parents of children who either were or had been students in the district. Their tenures ranged from two to 22 years ($x = 6.7$). A majority had worked with two or three superintendents although two indicated that they had worked with six. None of the board presidents were members of a minority group.

When asked why they elected to run for the school board, 20% responded that they were asked to run by neighbors, friends, or teachers. Twenty-eight percent indicated that they ran because they believed that the school district was in trouble and needed a new approach to resolving district problems. Thirty-two percent stated that they possessed an insight and/or ability that could assist

the schools and this was why they chose to run for office. Interestingly, eight percent decided to run for the school board in order to keep someone else from being elected. The remainder of the responses represented a variety of individual reasons for seeking the school board position.

When asked about special interest groups and their influence, only two respondents indicated the existence of any such group. One was characterized as being "against everything" and the other was connected to athletics. Additionally, only 20% of the school districts in the study had active teacher organizations that formally negotiated with the school board. One school did have a binding arbitration agreement with the board. Although, in general, the power and influence of special interest groups appeared to be minimal, one interviewee reported that the problem with the school was a specific individual in the community who controlled both the board and the superintendent.

Critical Problems

Each board president was asked to identify critical problems that had existed between the board and any of the previous superintendents. Most were able to do so quite readily. The most common problems related to financial mismanagement (30.5%), financial malfeasance on the part of the superintendent (25.4%), communication (37.2%), immorality (5%), and other (1.5%).

INSERT TABLE II

ABOUT HERE

Two board chairs responded that they "just didn't like" the superintendent and that created a critical problem. One interviewee observed that the religion of the superintendent caused a problem. Only two of the respondents failed to identify that any critical problem had existed between the board and any superintendent. The majority of the issues identified led to a change of the district superintendent.

Financial Mismanagement. Financial issues which related to mismanagement and malfeasance represented over half of the responses. Financial mismanagement (30.5%) was often identified as a major problem area between school boards and superintendents. One board president reported that the superintendent had spent all the school district's yearly allocation and that a local bank had to file a lawsuit to recoup its losses. This same superintendent failed to report all the district encumbrances to the board and the encumbrances were not discovered until the following school year.

Another respondent indicated that one of their previous superintendents had purchased "over $10,000 in supplies" from his daughter who was a distributor of cleaning supplies and that the superintendent himself was deeply involved in the same organization. One board president stated that the superintendent had hired too many teachers and had seven coaches on a staff when only two were needed. This action reduced the district cash reserve from $200,000 to approximately $4,000 in one year. The board was then forced to implement a reduction in force program in order to avoid bankruptcy.

Financial Malfeasance. A second common response related to the issue of financial malfeasance by the superintendent (25.4%). These were issues relating to the honesty of the superintendent that had a direct impact on the financial well-being of the district. The litany of identified problems ranged from theft to lying about finances to the board. One board chair-person stated that "experience just gave the superintendent the know-how to legally steal."

One respondent indicated that an administrator had purchased a tobacco license in the name of the school and then used the license to purchase his cigarettes. Another board member stated that the superintendent had allowed anyone to charge gas at a local service station simply by indicating that the purchase was for the school business. This same superintendent often filled his two cars, truck, and boat at the expense of the district until the board stopped the activity. He also typically mailed out school district warrants without school board approval. The board president further stated that the superintendent had frequently utilized a credit card for purchases and when the

board decided to review the charges, it found that many of them "had been bar bills". This superintendent soon left the school for another position.

Another board president reported that a superintendent had the board approve claims from what was discovered to be a nonexistent business. The money, amounting to several hundred dollars per month, was sent to a false address and later collected by the superintendent and placed in his personal checking account. One superintendent purchased hunting rifles for each board member as appreciation gifts but failed to advise the board that the purchases had been made with school funds. A board president was especially unhappy at the superintendent who gave himself an unauthorized $5,000 salary increase.

Many of the interviewees identified financial expertise and financial integrity as the two most important traits superintendents should possess. Several expressed surprise at the dishonesty of some administrators. One board chair stated, "I always had held the superintendent in high esteem and I was shocked by his actions of dishonesty." Another board president stated that she "thought superintendents were supposed to be educators." An additional board president asserted that "some have lost sight of why they're in education." It was apparent that many board presidents became overly cautious and critical of subsequent superintendents after involvements with dishonest ones. One board president acknowledged that it now was difficult to fully trust the current superintendent.

Communication Issues. Communication problems (37.2%) represented the largest single response area for board presidents. One board chair asserted that "one superintendent wouldn't tell anyone what was going on. He wanted to do things his own way. He was very set in his ways and wouldn't take suggestions or advice." A respondent observed that since the superintendent would not tell the board what was happening within the district, it forced the board "to delve into the running of the school." Another board president stated that his superintendent only discussed what he wanted others to know. Several interviewees complained that their superintendents wouldn't admit to making mistakes.

One board president stated that members of the community attended board meetings only so they could stay informed. He indicated that the superintendent rarely advised the community of anything. Another respondent observed that the superintendent "could talk for 30 to 40 minutes and then the board would have to ask him if that was a yes or a no." At least five of the interviewees characterized a good superintendent as one who would not be aloof or inaccessible to either patrons or the staff. They felt that an important trait for superintendents was the ability to treat people in a caring manner and the need to do so especially with teachers.

Immorality. Concerns for the immoral behavior on the part of superintendents represented five percent of the responses by the board chairs. Issues relating to such matters inevitably led either to terminations or to resignations of the superintendents in question. One superintendent, according to a board president, was having an affair with a woman who lived in the superintendent's previous school district when "her husband came to the board and said he would blow the whistle if they didn't do something." Another superintendent was terminated for having an affair with one of the school's principals. This same superintendent attempted to hire a particular teacher but the board refused to do so, according to the board president, because of the superintendent's obvious sexual agenda. Another board member indicated that a superintendent had impregnated a high school senior. This superintendent subsequently left his position, divorced his wife, married the student, and currently serves as a superintendent in another district. One third of the board presidents interviewed identified the need for superintendents to possess an unreproachable moral attitude.

Resignation/Termination

The 25 board presidents interviewed represented districts that had 88 superintendents in the past five years. Twenty-seven (43%) of the 63 superintendents who left the districts were either terminated or forced to resign at the end of the school year. Three (5%) were terminated during the school year. Fifteen (23%) resigned either to accept positions in larger districts or

to accept positions that paid more. The remainder left because of health, retirement, or death. One became a board member after retiring.

School Board Reactions to Turnovers

The board presidents were asked to describe what processes were established to hire new superintendents given the nature of past problems. Ninety-two percent revealed that only the board interviewed superintendent applicants. Several school boards allowed the outgoing superintendent to participate in the interview process. During the interviews the board generally indicated that information relating to experience, leadership, integrity and financial skills were most actively sought. The education level of applicants was seldom a factor in the hiring process. Indeed, one board president was concerned when several individuals with doctorates applied in his district and wondered who someone with a doctorate would desire to be a superintendent in a small, rural school.

Many of the interviewees revealed that the board hired superintendents based only on personal interviews and how applicants responded to board questioning. Only eight percent of the board presidents reported that they questioned anyone in the applicant's former district or community. Several of the board chair-persons felt that the boards too often asked applicants inappropriate questions. They identified such questions as "Does your daughter play basketball?"; "are you a Baptist?"; or "Do you bird hunt?" as representing a common approach taken by some board members.

Five of the board presidents stated that they would investigate future superintendents more thoroughly. One board president stated that the board needed to assess the school district's weaknesses and develop a vision of what direction they wanted the school district to pursue, and then hire the proper person to get them there. One respondent referred to the "good ol' boy" system which often hampered the search for a good leader. Many contended that it was difficult to hire good superintendents unless the boards were able to increase the salaries offered. This was often difficult to do in small districts with limited resources. On the whole, the respondents exhibited concern about the hiring process, but provided little data that demonstrated an effort to improve

the process. One member admitted, "It is entirely the school board's fault for failing to hire good people." The primary change relating to hiring appeared to relate to visiting the applicant's current or previous school district.

Conclusions

Categories relating to finance and communication represent common issues that superintendents confront on a daily basis. Thus, while these findings may not be generalizable to other districts experiencing high turnover, the categories of critical issues represent major employment attributes and duties of any superintendent. Clearly, it is difficult for effective schools to develop when constant change in leadership is occurring. Certainly not all superintendents represented here were terminated or forced to resign. Several did so for health or age reasons. Yet, the fact remains that each of the identified schools had at least three superintendents in five years. A degree of stability in schools in a must if schools are to maximize their mission of educating all children.

All the board presidents interviewed recognized the need for this stability. Some felt the constant turnover could be resolved if more money could be offered to potential superintendents. Others believed that the problem was with the interview process and the need to structure it in a manner that didn't focus just on "bird-hunting" and "girls' basketball". A few boards had begun to investigate applicants more thoroughly. However, a constant irritation for the board presidents was the inability to get useful answers and assistance regarding superintendent applicants from either the State Department of Education or the State School Boards Association. The board presidents indicated that every superintendent who had been hired, even those who were ineffective, were given good recommendations by these two agencies. Board presidents were continually frustrated by the lack of assistance from these agencies.

There are several important messages here. First, boards must be more thorough in the selection and hiring process. State agencies responsible for certification of school administrators must become more proactive in addressing

the issue of ineffective administrators. Those superintendents who are identified as dishonest or immoral need to be dealt with firmly by appropriate state agencies. Both the School Boards Association and the State Department of Education would be more credible if they would monitor and provide direct assistance to those schools experiencing excessive turnover. This assistance may be in the form of specific training for boards in question or the assignment of state ombudsman to assist schools with such problems. Certainly, the universities who train superintendents must accept some of the responsibility for ineffective administrators. Educational requirements must be more relevant and focus not just on managing and organizing but also on issues such as integrity, communication, and morality. School leaders need not only manifest an appropriate value system but must also possess the astuteness to recognize and respond to community concerns and power structures. The schools in question can never function effectively without good leadership. The school board, the community, and the school staff must work together to insure that this happens. Then, and only then, will the children of each school district receive the education they deserve.

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TABLE 1

SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS

Occupations	Number N=25		Percentage	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
RANCHER/FARMER	7		28.0%	
OIL AND GAS	4		16.0%	
INSURANCE AGENT	1	1	4.0%	4.0%
POSTMASTER	1	1	4.0%	4.0%
TEACHER ASSISTANT		1		4.0%
CARPENTER	1		4.0%	
BANK CASHIER		1		4.0%
TECHNICAL ENGINEER	1		4.0%	-
CONSTRUCTION	1		4.0%	
CLAIMS EXAMINER		1		4.0%
CIVIL SERVICE	1		4.0%	
STEEL FABRICATOR	1		4.0%	
STORE OWNER		1		4.0%
RETIRED		1		4.0%
TOTAL	18	7	72.0%	28.0%

TABLE II

INCIDENTS OF CAUSES FOR
SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER

CATEGORY	BOARD PRESIDENT RESPONSES PERCENTAGE
FINANCIAL MISMANAGEMENT	30.5%
FINANCIAL MALFEASANCE	25.4%
COMMUNICATION	37.2%
IMMORALITY	5.0%
OTHER	1.5%
TOTAL	99.6%